

Uncovered

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Malawi Reflection #7
Friday March 16, 2007

Alright, where were we? When we left off last time, our group had just arrived, at long last, to the school in Bakasala. At the end of a long journey, our work was just beginning.

"(1/10/07)

Initially, I sun screened myself and mingled with some of the kids. Over the course of our 5 ½ hour journey to the school, I had been thinking of one boy in particular. He is about 20 years old and one of the few Catholics in the village. He speaks the worst English of all the boys his age who I met. I'm not sure exactly why he was in my mind, but I kept thinking of how excited/nervous he always was when I spoke with him."

Soon after our arrival, we set ourselves to the task of distributing the donations, but the obvious question was, how? Based on Patrick's previous experiences of unpaid dues and undistributed donations, we couldn't trust any single village leader to distribute the goods in an equitable manner. Living under the tremendous burden of poverty seems to corrode morals in many cases and third world corruption has been well documented in numerous developing nations.

From experience, we knew that free things attract many people... especially people in chronic need. Therefore, we needed a way to distribute things without causing a mob. Hopefully we could give everyone an equal amount in an orderly fashion until the supplies ran out. To accomplish this, our strategy was to put all who were present into one of the classrooms and latecomers into a second classroom. As the villagers filed out of the classrooms one by one, they would be given individual portions of our donations and then they would be free to go.

"We then set up somewhat of an assembly line. Upon exiting the classroom at the direction of Cristian (in Spanish) and Chris (in Chichewa) they each received candy from Kendal and me, then protein/glucose biscuits from Hector and Jena, then clothing from Carolina and Pete, then school supplies from Laura and Sarah as Jesús photographed from above (on the roof) and Patrick photographed in the middle of the chaos. It was truly disturbing to watch the children churn towards the door. There was no way to stop them from pushing. Their own family members were in the mob and all were pushing their way through. Many little ones were crying and being smushed. Thankfully, Chris was able to pace the line and out set-up funneled the children out very effectively.

It was staggering to see the entire village come out of that room, one by one, each and every person.

A child with leprosy,

A child with a locust in his ear,

A child whose pants were split right down the middle,

About 4 children whose clothing was torn to reveal their backside,

Countless young (5-year-old) girls with infant siblings on their back,

Bare breasts of nursing mothers,

Men and women of all ages, in line simply out of need,

More swollen bellies and pointed navels than I could count, symbols of malnutrition, especially among young children,

Open sores on the skin, signs of AIDS, with flies inside of them,

Sleeping babies (perhaps ill) with flies all over their faces,

Tears from children who had been pushed,

Smiles from grateful people,

Bow of thanks from the elders,

*Desperation in the eyes of many,
Upper-lips coated in mucus,
Familiar faces of those I'd come to know in this brief time in Bakasala,
The glimmer in the eyes of children receiving gifts for the first time,
Appreciative confusion."*

Within the pandemonium, there wasn't time for a philosophical discussion, just observation. In fact, the observations themselves were overwhelming. These people had never before received gifts. All that they possessed in life they had worked for. Generosity was a necessity for survival of the family, not some high-minded spiritual notion. This scene is the embodiment of desperation in my mind. Each person wanted his or her share. There was no chance of orderly or equitable distribution.

On second thought, what were we thinking in our efforts to give organized handouts? The term itself is an oxymoron. Just think of it: is generosity still generous when it's rationed? It seems like a contradiction in terms...

Many of our group chose to distance themselves from this entire activity. As a part of the "assembly line" the entire experience was extremely difficult for me. It seemed very domineering to put all of the Malawians in the room and all of the foreigners on the porch, allowing each person to come through one at a time. The dichotomy was stilted, awkward, and imperialistic. I felt incredibly pompous standing six feet tall and looking down upon these poor people and giving them gumballs and candy. The village elders were bowing to me in appreciation. WHY?! What had I done? Simply, packed a couple extra pencils and t-shirts. The strong and patient men who taught me how to saw through rafters and who sat, sweating without food while I ate lunch everyday now waited patiently for Kendal to hand them some lemon drops. After working so hard to establish community, we segregated ourselves for the purposes of expedient distribution. We were no longer working together to construct a school – we were diving ourselves to allow the wealthy to hand down our excess to the poor.

What we did that day was pure charity. Charity is wonderful. Giving to those in need is an essential component of Christian living. But is charity enough? From where I was standing, our charity didn't feel like justice. We weren't changing any systemic problems or obstacles for these people, all we were doing was creating boundaries that hadn't formerly existed in the village of Bakasala. We were reinforcing their notion that foreigners are targets for begging. We were destroying the collaboration of our exhausting labor. We were committing injustice before our very eyes. All in the name of generosity. How short-sighted! How callous! What alternative did we have?

We came to serve, to act justly, to love. But isn't charity the same as love? *Ubi caritas, et amor, Deus ibi est.* Wherever there are charity and love, God is there. There is a distinction between caritas and amor in Latin as well as in English. Charity is a relationship of giving and receiving. Love is a relationship of sharing. What we did that day in Bakasala was charity indeed, but it was not love.

Charity is easy. I can throw money at a cause and act like I've done my part. I usually get a button or a t-shirt or my name in a brochure. I can feel like a proponent of justice, without actually **doing** anything in the name of justice. The privileged people of the world have the resources to do a lot of good in the world, but much of that good goes undone. Our nation gives billions of dollars in international aid, but poverty still exists. On second thought, I shouldn't point the finger at the international community, poverty is a reality in America... many just choose to ignore it – or, rather – to give their old clothes and canned food to charity and forget about the poverty in our midst. Charity is easy because it doesn't require interaction. I can stand tall and hand out gumballs all day long, but the world will not change. People will starve.

Treatable illnesses will kill the innocent. Clean drinking water will remain a precious luxury. The vicious cycle of poverty remains unbroken. This is not justice. This is not love.

However, this is not the end of the story.

"I think this is perhaps the most formidable social interaction of my life. I had no idea how to respond other than to replace my look of concern with an innocuous smile.

Also, looking over my shoulder I could see into the room through the lattice window. The crowd was wild with pushing kids, but older people were forming a line around the perimeter of the room. I noticed the boy who I was talking about earlier had put himself near the end of the line.

We ran out of clothes first, about halfway through the first room...

I began mingling with the children in the schoolyard. They were both confused and thrilled by their new gifts... As I continued to walk around the schoolyard, I came upon the boy I mentioned earlier. He had been at the back of the line for the food distribution (voluntarily) and had thus missed out on clothing. He had been wearing the same tattered button-down shirt every time I'd seen him.

As I approached him, he touched his shirt and said "Klo-thiz."

Not understanding, I asked him to repeat what he said. "Clo-this" was the best he could do, but he was wondering where the rest of the clothes were. I was not about to tell him there weren't any clothes left and, recognizing the significance of the moment, I instinctively began unbuttoning my own, short sleeve, plaid, Tommy Hilfiger shirt. I wasn't wearing an undershirt and it was my last "clean" shirt.

I responded, "The clothes are right here."

As I handed him the shirt off my back, it was clear that it wasn't at all what he'd expected. However, he didn't refuse the gift or ask me to put it back on, he took it willingly, clearly he felt his need.

I give thanks to God for creating that moment, for leading me to the table of generosity and allowing me to give.

On Sunday, I prayed about giving my shirt and tie to a man with no legs who was sitting a few pews in front of me at mass. Unfortunately, the man left after communion and I never had the chance. That day I was wearing an undershirt. That day wasn't the right time.

The Lord showed me the time and place. He gave me the courage and freedom to live generous love just for a moment.

As I stood there, bare-chested, in the middle of the schoolyard, I had exposed a lot more than an arm or a leg. All that covered my chest was my Kairos cross.

I felt the eyes of countless bystanders looking at the half-naked Muzungu. In this culture, modesty is paramount. Even if there were 2 untorn seams, people would put on a garment. Nakedness was not accepted and all the people wore whatever they could afford.

As many Malawians stared and/or giggled, I made my way onto the bus and put on my rain jacket to cover myself in the 80° heat.

Even more importantly than the short-term gift of the shirt, I hope God taught larger lessons that day.

I hope those who saw the bare, white chest came to realize that generosity is not merely from our excess.

I hope the other members of our team remembered that giving is not merely about stepping off a plane with hundreds of dollars in your pocket, it is real.

I hope Malawians found out that we didn't just come to pass out biscuits and wave goodbye.

I hope my action was fitting of God's call in that moment.

I hope others saw the love of Christ in my simple act of generosity.

...to give and not to count the cost...

...to labor and not to ask for any reward...

This is my faith. This is love.

I came to love.

God showed me how.

I don't remember if I even shook the boy's hand before jumping in the bus. I'm pretty sure he said thank you and I said "Zikomo." I do know that no one got a picture or video of that moment. For that I am grateful. I think it would have cheapened the moment to have "captured" it on film.

I'm proud to say I have a memory rather than a photo. I lived that moment with open eyes, not through a camera lens... the whole reason I was able to love was that I had immersed myself in that moment. Thank you, Lord, for the present.

I have a really hard time explaining how I felt in that moment. It was like "no big deal." It was as though I was prepared for it and of course I was going to shed my shirt for this boy. What Amazing Grace!"

I'm not sure what else to say...

We spent another hour or so hanging out with kids, singing and dancing, laughing and wishing we could stay longer or sustain our newfound community. Finally, I got into the bus and shut the door... relishing the hunger in my stomach, the love in my heart, and the view of the African sunset on the horizon.

In the morning, we began our 43 hour journey home to St. Louis. My surroundings have changed and, sadly, so has my attitude. Reentering America and college life has certainly taken a toll on the pure faith, hope, and love of my experiences in Malawi, but the spirit and the memory are powerful in my life and my future.

I believe in the Truth of my genuine experience in Malawi.

I believe in the love that I felt in the midst of total strangers.

I believe there's no better way to break down boundaries than exuberant joy and reckless love.

I believe that ignorance begets poverty.

I believe that charity is a gift and justice is a struggle.

I believe that for one moment, God showed me how to love.

I believe that moment is enough to sustain my generosity for the rest of my life.

For as long as I live, I will not forget that moment. For once I gave of my need and not of my excess. For once I didn't ask questions or point a camera. For once I lost track of my own needs and desires amidst the needs of another. For once I lived in the fullness of the moment. For once I acted out love. For once I gave God the chance to answer my prayer... a simple silent prayer of fear and exhaustion after a sleepless night beneath a flimsy blue net in a land far from home...

"(12/29/06)

Lord, may I abide in you.

Free me from expectations,

Free me from timidity,

Free me from fear.

Together, let us cast off the nets that surround me.

May I stand covered only by the security of your grace.

May I be bitten and stung by the trials of love and service.

May I stand uncovered."

Amen.